

Paris as Seen by a Westerner

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The casual American visitor to Paris stops at a high-priced hotel where nearly everyone speaks English, drinks a glass of wine on the terrace of the Cafe de la Paix, passes an evening at the Moulin Rouge or Maxim's, and departs, boasting that he has "seen" Paris. But he hasn't.

From the boulevards and the cafes the stranger gets the impression that Parisians give their entire time to dancing and drinking and spending money; that they are without a serious purpose in life. Though "it takes all kinds of people" to make up this city, like any other, such an impression does the Frenchman an injustice and, in entertaining it, the visitor deceives himself.

I confess that for several weeks I was deluded by the same false notion. But for the last six months we have been living over on the left bank of the Seine, studying the real Paris life, which isn't all of the butterfly variety by any means. As a matter of fact Parisians are extraordinarily frugal—the most frugal people on earth, I suppose. They understand to the full the value of a sou and can give Americans profitable lessons in judicious saving. The resident who has not a growing bank account is a rare exception and the proprietors of even the smallest shops have their bonds stored away for the rainy day.

Clerks and workmen wear long blouses, which look like night-shirts, and all school-children are attired similarly. These protect the clothing and, of course, make it last longer. Parisians never travel abroad. They rarely leave Paris, in fact, and the French countrymen seldom emigrate. The result is that their money moves around in a circle and France has become the financial store-house of Europe. You will recall that when Uncle Sam became "hard up" last year France lent him money.

One of the greatest things in Paris is its cab system. One can drive halfway across the city for a franc—20 cents—which is less, I believe, than it costs to go from the Western Weekly office to the Short Line station. If you buy a chair or a small table and are in a hurry to have it delivered, you merely hail a cab, climb in, place the piece of furniture across your lap and tell the driver to go ahead. Washerwomen deliver the laundry in cabs and market men and women use the same vehicle of locomotion in going to work.

It is a blessing that cab-hire is so cheap, for if such a street railway system as exists here were to inflict itself upon Bingham, Utah, the city council would revoke the franchise within a week. The omnibuses are uncomfortable and, of course, slow. The telephone service is abominable, but nobody seems to care. The people, as a rule, are in no hurry, so there are 'phones in practically no residences and even in comparatively few business houses. There are said to be 350,000 telephones in New York and 200,000 in Chicago, but Paris has only 45,000.

Such conditions as these tempt the American to write it "JAY Paree" instead of "gay Paree." But there are other reasons. What we regard as simple comforts and some things that, in America, are counted as actual necessities, are luxuries here. For instance, only the aristocrats have bath-tubs in their houses. When he feels moved to bathe the ordinary plug mortal does one of three things. He may pack his "change" of clothing into a small grip and hie himself to a public bath house, but this method has its disadvantages, for one is never certain of the race or condition of the person who has just preceded him in a tub. If he prefers, the soiled one may order his bath brought to him. Tubs, hot water and all are delivered in wagons anywhere in the city for a nominal sum, by a company organized for the purpose. But the most popular is the primitive way of remaining in one's room and using one's washbowl.

We dread the approach of winter for, though we have a so-called "modern" apartment, for which we pay a "modern" rental, the heating facilities threaten to prove inadequate. Parisians depend on grates of old-fashioned construction and pay dear for fuel. Anna Gould's pink marble palace is one of the few houses in town which is steam-heated.

The first thing I do when I get back to God's country is to buy a good, square meal. I'm hungry—or was until we went to house-keeping. I had heard so much about the excellence of French cooking that in London I refrained from eating, saving my appetite for the great feast to be enjoyed here. The French chef's reputation probably is deserved so far as his ability to mix salads and sauces is concerned, but a good Kansas City beefsteak—like Vandeventer and Billy Winch and I used to have in old K. C. together—can be found here only after patient, persistent searching.

Besides, in Paris you are never quite sure whether you are eating beef or "mulet." There are 235 markets in town where horse-meat is sold. It costs just about half as much as beef, but thousands of people consider it a luxury. Connoisseurs say it is sweet and delectable. I am willing to take their word for it. I have never tasted it—knowingly.

The Parisian's character is not so different from that of the average human to be found anywhere else, as Americans are led to suppose. He works the French equivalents of "Thank you" and "Beg pardon" and "If you please" overtime, and the men take off their hats to one another, but, also, they elbow the women off the sidewalks, so I have concluded that their reputation for politeness is not entirely merited. At any rate I have been unable to find the original perpetrators of the "Alphonse-Gaston" stunt or even any good imitators.

And the French type which you see in "Peggy From Paris" and such productions doesn't exist. They are loquacious and volatile, and insist upon talking with their arms as well as their mouths, but they do much more bowing and scraping on an American stage than in a Paris street.

Whenever I become disgusted I go out and look for a funeral procession. When I find one my admiration for the people returns. For when a cortege passes through the streets every man in sight—whether beggar or millionaire—removes his hat. Yet when one observes this pretty little tribute of respect to the dead he wonders at the lack of consideration which custom shows the living relatives. The mourners follow the hearse, not in carriages, but on foot, trudging the entire distance from the church or the house to the cemetery.

The Bon Marche, the original of the world's great department stores, still exists, and is said to continue to do a greater volume of business than any other retail house on either side of the Atlantic not excepting Marshall Field's or Wanamaker's. But this, like everything else in Paris, except the fashions in feminine finery, is behind the times in many respects. No Paris store has a pneumatic cash messenger system, connecting the counters with the cashier's desk. When you make a purchase you accompany the clerk to the wrapping counter, see it "done up," and then personally pay the cashier, while he enters in a large book a minute description of every article you have purchased.

A bright spot to any American who drifts into the Latin Quarter is the club-house of the American Art Association. Most of the members are students of painting or architecture, but any American man may join if he is able to prove himself a reasonably good fellow. "Smokers" and dances are given occasionally, American papers and magazines are on file, a good cafe is operated in connection with the club, and the temporary exiles from "the States" help one another to overcome the feeling of homesickness when it appears.

Yes, we have been to Maxim's, the Bal Tabarin, the Bullier, the Dead Rat and a few others. You recollect that Evelyn Thaw testified that she and Harry celebrated at the Dead Rat during the greater part of one night and then went back to the flat and cooked breakfast on a gas-stove in the bath-tub. I recall this testimony because I fear that in a previous remark I made to you I gave the impression that there are no bath-tubs in Paris except those you rent just long enough for a single, brief plunge.

Of course everybody knows what Maxim's and these other places are, and you have been there yourself. The girls dance around your table while you eat and drink and these cafes and bals have not the official endorsement of the Y. M. C. A. They are interesting to visit once or twice, but when you have seen one you have seen the whole bunch.

I almost forgot to mention that there are also some excellent art galleries in Paris. If you wish details of these advise me and I'll gladly send you the catalogues.

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